

IBN KHALDUN AND OCCASSIONALISM

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ABSTRACT:

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is said to be the first scholar to make history and society the direct objects of a systematic science. This paper will examine the role of occasionalism in his thought. This question is interesting because a perennial objection to occasionalism has been that it denies any real natural order, and therefore precludes the possibility of any systematic natural science. If Ibn Khaldun was an occasionalist, then it would mean that one of the earliest pioneers in attempting to apply a systematic scientific method to the study of history and society did so on the basis of an occasionalist understanding of nature and natural order. Then the question of whether and how his scientific methodology is compatible with occasionalism is of interest for both historical and theoretical reasons, in particular for theists who are exploring occasionalism as a potential framework for a coherent understanding of the natural world (including, in this case, its human and social dimensions) as both the manifestation of divine providence and creativity, and as an object of systematic empirical science.

KEY WORDS: Ibn Khaldun, occasionalism, causality, *kalām*

I. Introduction

Ibn Khaldun (1332-1406) is a unique figure in the history of ideas. He is widely viewed to be the first scholar to make history and society the direct objects of a systematic science, which he presents in the *Muqaddima* (literally, the 'introduction') to his massive historical work, *Kitab al-'Ibar* ('Book of Examples'). This discipline, which he named the science of human society, aims to go beyond mere historical narrative to discover the underlying causes and principles governing historical events. Consequently, the early

development of the modern social sciences in the nineteenth century generated a great deal of scholarly interest in Ibn Khaldun that continues today.¹

In the modern scholarship on Ibn Khaldun, the question of occasionalism arises as part of a wider controversy over the nature of his thought, in particular over the proper classification of his ideas according to preconceived categories like, “modernity”, “classical philosophy” or “religious dogma.” There were a number of attempts to construe Ibn Khaldun as a kind of proto-“modernist,” in the service of a diverse range of ideological agendas. Orientalists sought to portray Ibn Khaldun as the “rationalist” exception to the “irrational” rule of Islamic culture. Muslim modernists sought to present him as a Muslim source of western modernity, and even of dialectical materialism. Arab nationalists have made him one of their symbols of “original” Arab rationalism, purified from what they see as the “corruption” of Persian “mysticism.”²

Any “native” aspiration to the pretense of “modernity” could not, of course, go without a good orientalist rebuttal, one of which was delivered by H.A.R. Gibb, in response, specifically, to Kamil Ayad and Erwin Rosenthal. Of course, since the shape of the question is determined by the modernist fixation on the artificial “reason-religion” dichotomy, the discussion turns almost singularly on the question, as Gibb puts it, of “how far Ibn Khaldun deserves to be credited with the freedom from religious bias or pre-occupations which both

¹ Alatas, Syed Farid. *Ibn Khaldun* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 105-116

² Zaidi, Ali. *Islam, Modernity, and the Human Sciences* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011).

these writers ascribe to him?”³ To support his claim, Gibb naturally needed to dismiss the evidence on offer, for Ibn Khaldun’s modernity and (presumably) therefore, his capacity for independent rational thought.

Here, the question of occasionalism takes a central role. “His doctrine of causality and natural law, which in Dr. Ayad’s view stands in such sharp opposition to Muslim theological views,” Gibb declares, “is simply that of the *sunnat Allah*, so often appealed to in the Qur’an.”⁴ The underlying presumption seems to be that, to the extent that Ibn Khaldun makes any reference to *sunnat Allah* (“way of God;” i.e. the pattern of Divine will), he can thereby be *exposed* as someone essentially on the “belief” side of the “religion-belief” dichotomy to which the whole affair is reduced. This dichotomy rests on the further presumption, that unless worldly phenomena are understood as completely unrelated to God, they must be absolutely unintelligible in natural terms. As Aziz Al-Azmeh, in his extensive critique of Gibb, puts it, “the implication is that the notion of *sunnat Allah*, when invoked, magically works toward the eradication of natural causalities.”⁵ Understood without the imposed prism of the “reason-belief” dichotomy, Al-Azmeh asserts, the idea of *sunnat Allah* - or *mustaqarr al-‘āda* (uniformity of custom) - carries no such implication. He writes,

Occasionalism deals with the metaphysical structure of efficient causality and treats man within the context of an ontology of

³ Gibb, H.A.R. “The Islamic Background of Ibn Khaldun’s Political Theory,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies, University of London*. 7, No. 1 (1933): 23-31.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 23-31.

⁵ Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship: A Study in Orientalism* (London: Third World Centre for Research and Publishing, 1981), 79-80.

created cause. If this ontology were accepted, nothing would stand in the way of rationally elaborating the phenomenal existence of that which exists by virtue of this ontology, either logically or “religiously”...Causality is an epistemological entity, a judgment upon relations between things. If such relations do not lend themselves to rational demonstration due to their ontological status, this should not mean that their ontological attributes cannot be bracketed and the relations given rational considerations in themselves, as in juridical judgments.⁶

Is this how Ibn Khaldun understood the matter? From the vantage of occasionalism, the question is interesting for more than the vain concern over whether or not Ibn Khaldun was ‘truly’ modern. For a perennial objection to occasionalism has been that it denies any real natural order, and therefore precludes the possibility of any systematic natural science. If Ibn Khaldun was an occasionalist, then it would mean that one of the earliest pioneers in attempting to apply a systematic scientific method to the study of history and society did so on the basis of an occasionalist understanding of nature and natural order. Then the question of whether and how his scientific methodology is compatible with occasionalism is of interest for both historical and theoretical reasons, in particular for theists who are exploring occasionalism as a potential framework for a coherent understanding of the natural world (including, in this case, its human and social dimensions) as both the manifestation of divine providence and creativity, and as an object of systematic empirical science.

In the *Muqaddima*, in the course of an account of dialectical theology (*‘ilm al-kalam*), Ibn Khaldun does express a theory of causation that is

⁶ Ibid., 81

effectively occasionalist, in that he prescribes a methodology of proceeding in the study of nature *as if* occasionalism is true, but which is indefinite as to whether he held to a thorough metaphysical occasionalism. I will examine this account, and clarify some misunderstandings to show that there is no real conflict between such a position and his references to natural causality, properly understood. Then, I will examine an argument, based on Ibn Khaldun's own methodological prescriptions, that rebuts the case that Ibn Khaldun is an occasionalist. Finally, I will attempt to resolve this tension by offering a reading of Ibn Khaldun as an occasionalist, which is compatible with a broadly realist position on the ontological status of universals, and arguing that consequently, his methodological references to the "nature" (*ṭabīy'ah*) and "essence" (*jawhar*) of civilization and historical events can be understood in a way that is coherent with this interpretation.

II. Ibn Khaldun on Causality

Henry Wolfson did a close study devoted almost solely to the section of the *Muqaddima* in which Ibn Khaldun deals with the issue of causality directly. As we will see, Wolfson may have been correct to interpret Ibn Khaldun, on the basis of this text, as an occasionalist. But there is some confusion in his reading, stemming from certain mistakes the examination and correction of which will lead us to a clearer, more accurate picture of Ibn Khaldun's understanding of causality. This picture gives us reason to be more

circumspect, definitely concluding only that Ibn Khaldun understood occasionalism as possibly true, and that his position is methodologically occasionalist, in the sense that study of nature can only (and so should) proceed *as if* occasionalism were true. But as for whether he positively adopts a thoroughly metaphysical occasionalist position, we can only conclude that this is possible. That is, a coherent interpretation of Ibn Khaldun as an occasionalist is compatible with this textual evidence, but not exclusively so.

Wolfson's analysis takes the following passage as its starting point:

We say: It should be known that the things that come into being in the world of existing things, whether they belong to essences or to either human or animal actions, require appropriate causes which are prior to (their existence). They introduce the things that come into being into the realm dominated by custom, and effect their coming into being. Each one of these causes, in turn, comes into being and, thus, requires other causes. Causes continue to follow upon causes in an ascending order, until they reach the Causer of causes, Him who brings them into existence and creates them.⁷

According to Wolfson, Ibn Khaldun's statement, that causes "introduce things that come into being into the realm dominated by custom", is actually a correction of what precedes it, and therefore an indication that, "Ibn Khaldun became conscious of a difficulty." The proof that Ibn Khaldun gives here, he claims, is the Aristotelian argument, leading to a God who is the remote Causer of causes, acting in the world only indirectly, through intermediate causes that

⁷ Ibn Khaldun. *Muqaddima*. Franz Rosenthal (trns.) and N.J. Dawood (ed.) (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004), 348-349

constitute a “real causal nexus in the world.”⁸ But Ibn Khaldun “did not believe in causality.” “To him the world was a succession of events, each of which was created directly by God,” explains Wolfson. “The sequence in this order of events which is observed is due to what the *mutakallimūn* (Islamic dialectical theologians) describe by the term “custom.” (*‘adah*).”⁹ The difficulty, then, is reconciling a proof of God’s existence that is based on the premise that there are contingent causes (i.e. causes other than God), with a theological doctrine that there are none.

But is it correct to say that Ibn Khaldun “did not believe in causality?” The operative assumption, in Wolfson’s reading, is that if God creates each event directly, and the order between them is due to custom, then “disbelief in causality” follows; or as Wolfson puts it, there is no “real causal nexus in the world.” Only then would it be necessary to understand Ibn Khaldun’s second statement about “custom” as a correction of the previous statement about causes. But according to Wolfson, Ibn Khaldun’s *correction* here “may be taken as a general explanation of all other places where he speaks of “nexuses between causes and things caused” or of “the dependence of things upon each other,” so that “by all these expressions he means only a conception of causality due to “custom.”¹⁰ If this is so, then it would seem there is no real difference between “custom” and “cause” in Ibn Khaldun’s terminology. And in

⁸ Wolfson, Harry A. “Ibn Khaldun on Attributes and Predestination,” *Speculum* 34 No. 4 (1959): 586.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 586.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 586.

that case, there is no basis for the sort of difficulty Wolfson supposes Ibn Khaldun to have become aware of here. The difficulty seems, instead, to be in Wolfson's interpretation.

Wolfson supports his position with three key statements by Ibn Khaldun. One is that "thinking perceives the order that exists among things that come into being either by nature or by arbitrary arrangement."¹¹ The second is that causes "are only known through custom and through conclusions which attest to apparent relationship."¹² The third is that, "all these things are connected with the divine power."¹³ The upshot of the first two, according to Wolfson, is that "it is our thinking that sees a causal nexus between things which we are accustomed to see following each other in ordered succession."¹⁴ As for the third, Wolfson explains, "that is, all things which through "custom" are seen to be causally connected with each other are in reality connected with God as their cause."¹⁵ Furthermore, this "custom", according to Wolfson, is "our custom of forming a judgment" – a subjective mental habit.¹⁶ Wolfson's interpretation, then, entails understanding the "order" among things that Ibn Khaldun mentions (which thinking perceives), as equivalent to a "casual nexus" that is not there, but is falsely projected onto things by our minds. This has the consequence, of course, that the order among existing things is merely a mental projection.

¹¹ Ibn Khaldun. *Muqaddima*. 334.

¹² Ibid., 349.

¹³ Ibid., 334.

¹⁴ Wolfson. "Ibn Khaldun on Attributes and Predestination," 587.

¹⁵ Ibid., 587.

¹⁶ Ibid., 587.

Besides the fact that two of the three statements he quotes are taken out of context, none of them remotely support such an interpretation. Ibn Khaldun actually makes the first statement in explanation of why human actions are well ordered. "This is because thinking perceives the order that exists among things that come into being either by nature or through arbitrary arrangement." Nothing here lends itself to the idea that 'thinking sees a causal nexus' between things, which is not really there. What Ibn Khaldun says, is that thinking perceives an order that exists among things. Indeed, if taken in context, the immediate import of the surrounding text opposes rather than supports any "denial of causality." "When it intends to create something," Ibn Khaldun writes, "it must understand the reason or cause of that thing, or the conditions governing it..."¹⁷ At any rate, his discussion here is about that which comes to be through human action, and not about the understanding of causality as such. When taken in context, the second statement Wolfson cites does pertain to that topic, but not in the way he claims.

"Furthermore, the way in which causes exercise their influence upon the majority of things caused is unknown," Ibn Khaldun writes, "They are only known through customary (experience) and through conclusions which attest to (the existence of an) apparent (causal) relationship."¹⁸ Here, we are actually told that causes are known. They are known by inference on the basis of our

¹⁷ Ibn Khaldun. *Muqaddima*, 334.

¹⁸ Ibid., 349.

customary experience. So Ibn Khaldun is not denying the existence of causes. Therefore, by “custom,” he does not mean a habit of forming fallacious causal judgments. The operative distinction here is not between “custom” and “causality”, but between causes, which are known, and “the way in which they exercise their influence.” “What that influence really is and how it takes place is not known,” he writes, “Therefore, we have been commanded completely to abandon and suppress any speculation about them and to direct ourselves to the Causer of all causes, so that the soul will be firmly coloured with the oneness of God.”¹⁹

This certainly does provide strong evidence of Ibn Khaldun’s occasionalist sympathies, but it is a far cry from a kind of error theory, which conceives “cause” and “custom” as mutually exclusive terms in order to advance a position according to which the latter fools us into fallaciously inferring or projecting the presence of the former. Wolfson, I think, is unconsciously imposing this modern interpretation of the Humean treatment of the “problem of causation” onto his reading of occasionalism. This is a common mistake arising from superficial similarities between Hume’s empirical argument and the argument al-Ghazālī launched in *Tahāfut al-Falāsifa* (*the Incoherence of the Philosophers*). But, as I have argued elsewhere, Humean skepticism and al-Ghazālī’s position are quite different and incompatible.²⁰

¹⁹ Ibid., 349.

²⁰ Moad, Edward Omar. “A Significant Difference Between al-Ghazali and Hume on Causation,” *Journal of Islamic Philosophy* 3 (2008): 22-39.

If we take the statements Wolfson cites at face value, and in context, a somewhat different picture emerges. The causal order is not, for Ibn Khaldun, something we simply impose onto experience through a habit of the mind. When he says, that “thinking perceives the order that exists among the things that come into being,” it is fairly clear here that he is taking it for granted, that there is an order existing among contingent things, and which can be grasped in thought. “When it intends to create something,” he writes in the next line, “it must understand the reason or cause of that thing, or the conditions governing it, for the sake of the order that exists among the things that come into being.”²¹ So, there are reasons, causes, and governing conditions of things that can be understood, and not just projected onto things by way of mental habit. These are, “in general, the principles of that particular thing,” and “such a principle must have another principle to which its own existence is posterior.”²² This means that causes form a chain, which confirms that we are talking about contingent causes (that is, causes other than God). “The degree to which a human being is able to establish an orderly causal chain determines his degree of humanity,” he then asserts. “Some people are able to establish a causal nexus for two or three levels; some are not able to go beyond that.”²³ Causes, causal chains, and causal nexuses, then, are not only real and comprehensible, but their comprehension is the unique excellence and very measure of

²¹ Ibn Khaldun. *Muqaddima*, 334.

²² *Ibid.*, 335.

²³ *Ibid.*, 335.

humanity. Furthermore, they are what Ibn Khaldun means by “the order” that thinking perceives among things.

Shortly thereafter, in Ibn Khaldun’s discussion of *‘ilm al-kalām*, we find the other key statements Wolfson refers to. “As a rule, man is only able to comprehend the causes that are natural and obvious and that present themselves to our perception in an orderly and well-arranged manner,” he writes, “because nature is encompassed by the soul and on a lower level than it.”²⁴ That is, the causes that we can comprehend are limited to those that are empirically perceivable through the apparent order and arrangement of natural phenomena. As for their metaphysical dimension, it is beyond us. “Furthermore, the way in which causes exercise their influence upon the majority of things caused is not known,” he writes. “They are only known through custom, and through conclusions which attest to apparent relationship.”²⁵ “Custom,” then, is the empirically apparent order and arrangement of natural phenomena, within which we identify specific causal chains and causal relations. Basically, “cause” for Ibn Khaldun means “custom” or “customary relationship.” Perhaps in the interest of precision, we might suggest a definition of “causal nexus”, in this sense, as the following: an empirically perceivable relationship between natural events that is part of the

²⁴ Ibid., 349.

²⁵ Ibid., 349.

apparent order and arrangement of natural events - an instance of a constant conjunction or correlation apparent in empirical phenomena.

Thus, when Ibn Khaldun says that when thinking intends to create something, it must understand its reason or cause, he means that one must understand the empirically perceivable relations which that type of thing can be observed to customarily stand in with other types of things in the order and arrangement of phenomena. When, in his discussion of *kalām* and his proofs for God's existence, he asserts, "the things that come into being...require appropriate causes," he means they must bear appropriate relations (that is, relations coherent with those, which other things of the same type have born) in the order of phenomena. Their causes will be things of a type they have customarily been spatio-temporally correlated to in the appropriate way. Such causes, "introduce the things that come into being into the realm dominated by custom."²⁶ That is, they provide a "place" – that is, a set of appropriate empirical relata – for the new thing or event, wherein it can fit coherently with the wider apparent phenomenal order.

The metaphysical question, as to what underwrites this phenomenal order, is not in Ibn Khaldun's terms, a question about "causality" per se. Thus, instead of distinguishing between "mere correlation" and "real causal nexus" as a Humean would do, Ibn Khaldun is distinguishing between causes and "the way in which they exercise their influence." That is, whatever it might be (other

²⁶ Ibid., 349.

than God) in virtue of which natural phenomena are customarily ordered in causal chains and causal nexuses, is not knowable to us. "What that influence really is and how it takes place is not known," he writes. "Therefore, we have been commanded completely to abandon and suppress any speculation about them and to direct ourselves to the Causer of causes, so that the soul will be firmly coloured with the oneness of God."²⁷ What is being prohibited here, is not investigation into the "apparent and obvious" causal relations at the empirical, phenomenal level, but rather speculation as to any metaphysical structure beyond that, ostensibly explaining why, ultimately, phenomena are ordered in the way they are (i.e. in terms of "forms" or "essential natures" underwriting metaphysically necessary laws, etc.). That is, not causes per se, but *causes* of causes. However, it is not for once suggested that the ultimate reason for causal order in nature is unknown; much less that there is none whatsoever, or that the order there appears to be is mere appearance produced by mental habit.

On the contrary, God is the Causer of causes (*musabbib al-asbāb*). Importantly, this interpretation of Ibn Khaldun's position forces us to understand his use of the term "cause" in two different senses. The sense in which God is the Causer is ontological, and the sense in which the "causes" that He causes *are* "causes," is phenomenal. What is unknown is whether He causes these causes by way of metaphysical intermediaries. Here, Ibn Khaldun does not

²⁷ Ibid., 349.

straightforwardly deny these, but he does insist that they cannot be known. So for him, the phenomenal order and its comprehensibility would be the same with or without the assumption of such intermediaries. In this section of his text, then, matters appear to be very much in line with al-Azmeh's understanding, cited above. The question that remains, then, is whether this all establishes conclusively that Ibn Khaldun was an occasionalist, since he does not positively deny the existence of metaphysical intermediaries between God and the phenomenal order, and simply insists that the question is beyond our knowledge and that speculation over it is prohibited. On the face of it, this seems to amount to nothing more than a kind of methodological occasionalism, whereby scientific inquiry proceeds on the basis of phenomenal causality alone, *as if* occasionalism is true, though we cannot positively know that it is.

The question, whether Ibn Khaldun's position here amounts to a thoroughgoing positive occasionalism, can best be approached by first asking what would need to be the case (even if unknowably) for occasionalism to be false? If the existence of phenomenal causal relations in nature does not violate the doctrine, then its falsification must require that something other than God be an efficient cause in the ontological sense. Unfortunately, in order to ascertain whether Ibn Khaldun was positively an occasionalist we may have to jeopardize the colouring of our souls with the oneness of God. Because the second question we have to ask is, of the "ways in which causes exercise their influence" - those "causes of causes" other than God, the existence of which Ibn

Khaldun seems to acknowledge as possible while denying our ability know: how are we to understand their hypothetical "causality"? If Ibn Khaldun is to be understood positively as an occasionalist, then they cannot be understood as causal in the ontological sense. On the other hand, they cannot be phenomenal, because *ex hypothesis* they are unobservable.

Ibn Khaldun has univocally asserted that God is the Causer of causes, but whether he could have positively held an occasionalist position depends on how he understood this. Logically and historically, there are three basic options. One position, currently known as "divine conservation", is that creatures depend on God to sustain their continued existence. The second, sometimes referred to as "continuous creation", is that God continually re-creates each thing at each moment of time. The third, associated much later with deism, is that creation depends on God only for its initial coming to be, after which it exists and operates causally on its own. The last is straightforwardly incompatible with occasionalism. The question is whether the first two do not entail occasionalism. They are equivalent inasmuch as they both entail that nothing exists independently of God. The question, then, is whether anything that does not exist independently can function as a cause in the ontological sense. If it can, then it must be such that some other thing depends on it to exist. But if nothing exists independently of God, can anything depend on other than God for existence? To me, the answer seems to be negative. But highly

intelligent persons have thought otherwise. So, I am not in a position to assert this as a given, nor is there space to engage the argument here.

It may well be that these are precisely the sort of questions which Ibn Khaldun asserts are beyond our ability to answer, in which case he cannot have positively either affirmed or denied an occasionalist position. On the other hand, if he did hold the occasionalist doctrine then he could not have consistently held a deist understanding of divine causality. But more specifically, he could not have understood any hypothetical, unobservable and unknowable causal intermediaries between God and phenomenal causes, as causal in either an ontological sense or a phenomenal sense. So any interpretation of Ibn Khaldun as positively occasionalist faces the question, in what third sense might such possible intermediaries be understood as “causal,” and yet compatible with occasionalism? I will suggest an answer to this question in what follows.

III. Ibn Khaldun on philosophy and scientific method

But the section *on ‘ilm al-kalām* by no means represents the sum of what deserves consideration. Muhsin Mahdi has made a far more extensive case than either Gibb or Wolfson, for a very different reading of Ibn Khaldun. For Mahdi, Ibn Khaldun is decidedly not an occasionalist. Al-Azmeh criticizes Mahdi as vigorously, and on similar grounds on which he criticizes Gibb; that is, that Mahdi imposes the same “reason-belief” dichotomy, albeit to place Ibn

Khaldun firmly in the “reason” camp. While this critique is valid, al-Azmeh overlooks another, philosophically more substantive dichotomy that seems to motivate Mahdi at least as much as the “reason-belief” dilemma, with which he prefaces his study of Ibn Khaldun, and to which he refers as a difference between the “ancients” and “moderns.” Mahdi writes,

The issue between the ancients and the moderns seems to raise the deeper issue of the nature of scientific knowledge and of Being. The ancients assert that behind the facts of history and experience there are universal and objective essences, natures, and causes, to which the concepts and judgments of the mind should correspond...The moderns start with the denial of objective essences, natures, and causes. Thus the horizon of the real is reduced to the facts of history and experience. Science and philosophy, insofar as they venture beyond the facts of history and experience, are hypothetical constructions, which have no objective counterparts.²⁸

For Mahdi, then, membership in the camp of “reason” is not identified simply as a kind of liberation from “belief” that culminates in modernity. Rather, it has to do with a view of the nature of knowledge, which rests essentially on the ancient Greek realist position with regard to the ontological status of universals. The phenomenal order taken by itself, *qua* phenomena, is essentially historical in nature. Observation and experience is always of the past. The future is not observed. Thus, if the phenomenal is taken as the sum of what exists, then anything said (or thought) of the future is, as Mahdi puts it, mere hypothetical conjecture on the basis of the past, for which there is no real

²⁸ Mahdi, Muhsin. *Ibn Khaldun's Philosophy of History* (Kuala Lumpur: The Other Press, 1957), 9-10.

object. From the ancient Greek view of Plato and Aristotle, genuine knowledge is not just of how things have been, but is of why they have been that way. But any answer to why they have been that way cannot be limited in reference to the historical, because that would ultimately amount to saying, that things have been the way they have been because they have been that way - which is no explanation at all.

So the possibility of genuine knowledge – the possibility of anything being intelligible – depends on the existence of some real object of reference that is not ultimately historical. Phenomenal order is a pattern in the relations between particular things or events that are individuated from each other by space and time. The intelligibility of this order must therefore rest in a unitary and unifying reality that operates in its determinative/explanatory function across (and is therefore, not bound by) space and time. This is provided for in Greek thought by the hypothesis of objectively real universals (whether Platonic forms, or the formal dimension of substances in Aristotle's hylomorphism), which inform historical phenomena with natures and essences that determine how (and therefore, explain why) individual things both have behaved in the way they have, and will behave in the way they will. On this model, the ways things have changed and will change through time is a function of what they *are* – their essential, universal natures. These are the proper objects of genuine knowledge through which, alone, spatio-temporal phenomena can be understood, to the extent that they can.

With the move, in some modern philosophy, toward a more radical empiricism, and a consequently nominalist/conceptualist anti-realism about universals (the position that universals do not exist objectively, but are only subjective creatures of thought or language), this model is reversed. The historical phenomena – how things have been observed to happen – is the ultimate objective reality, from which, *what* observed things are – any notion of a thing's "nature" – is merely a theoretical construct with no referent in objective reality other than the ultimately contingent, observed historical phenomena. Science and philosophy, on this paradigm, cannot aspire to knowledge of *why* things have happened, and will continue to happen, in the way they have. Instead, we are limited to ever more systematic observations of how things have happened, and ever more probable (at best) predictions, on the basis of those observations, of how things will happen in the future.

The bulk of the Islamic *falsafa* tradition, under the influence of Plato and Aristotle, operated under what Mahdi is calling the "ancient" epistemological-ontological paradigm. For Mahdi, Ibn Khaldun's unique intention and achievement was precisely to develop a science in answer to the question, how human history itself can be related, as an object, to this paradigm? Al-Azmeh is correct in pointing out that Mahdi's interpretation does involve an imposition of the "belief-reason" dichotomy - or as he puts it, understanding the central problem of Islamic thought as the relation between "Philosophy and The Law" – and that this forces him to explain away troublesome textual evidence

(including, perhaps, some of the section on *‘ilm al-kalām* discussed above), as a strategic maneuver in negotiating this relation. But inasmuch as Mahdi bases his case on what he sees as the epistemological and metaphysical entailments of the methodology of Ibn Khaldun’s new historical science, it deserves to be considered on its own merits.

According to Mahdi, Ibn Khaldun’s methodology is thoroughly Aristotelian. “Demonstrative reasoning, as expounded by Aristotle and the Muslim philosophers in their commentaries on Aristotle’s logical works, is the proper way to philosophic knowledge because it corresponds to, and abstracts the true nature of things,” he writes, “the proper method of philosophic investigation for Ibn Khaldun is, consequently, the material logic of Aristotle, the logic in which the nature of the mind meets the nature of the things investigated.”²⁹ As a consequence, he asserts, Ibn Khaldun rejected what Mahdi refers to as “two major schools of logic” in the *kalam*. He describes these as follows.

The first was the attempt of the “ancients” [i.e. early *mutakallimun*] to reject *en masse* the basic metaphysical foundation of logical demonstration (i.e. their denial of the objective existence of essences and essential attributes) and to substitute for it an atomistic-occasionalistic universe in which all effects are the direct creation of God rather than the result of causes inherent in the nature of things. This led them to the rejection of the objective existence of universals and to view universals and essences as purely mental constructions with no counterparts outside the mind. The second was the attempt of the “moderns” to follow the Stoics in their logical nominalism. These writers did not study logic as a

²⁹ Ibid., 79.

tool of knowledge, but as an “art in itself”...They deserted Aristotle’s logical works that treated the content of reasoning and dealt exclusively with its form.³⁰

There is, of course, a connection between the two “logical schools”, based on the premise that, rejecting the objective existence of universals amounts to rejecting the “metaphysical foundation of logical demonstration”, as Mahdi puts it. Indeed, for Mahdi, occasionalism – or more specifically, any denial of Aristotelian metaphysics – has catastrophic epistemological consequences. “The rejection of the quest for the nature of things by dialectical theologians,” he writes, “meant the rejection of the principle of causality as understood by Aristotle and Muslim philosophers.”³¹ But what he means to assert is the opposite – the rejection of the Aristotelian principle of causality entails abandoning the possibility of knowing the nature of things. Mahdi makes clear what is at stake for him here:

For the dialectical theologians, a causal relation is simply the customary relation between accidents, and not a certain and explanatory relation between objects arising from their very nature. Hence, the conception of what constitutes science underwent a basic change. For the philosophers, science par excellence is the certain and explanatory knowledge of nature and causes; with certainty and explanation as inexorably related, and neither of them alone constituting science...The dialectical theologians, on the other hand, rejected the certainty of any explanation; for according to them, all explanations are only probable.³²

Mahdi and al-Azmeh agree on this point: occasionalism rules out explanatory certainty in the natural sciences. As al-Azmeh puts it: “If reality is

³⁰ Ibid., 80.

³¹ Ibid., 141.

³² Ibid., 141-142.

occasionalistically structured, this implies that there is no mode of connection between things that can be demonstratively shown.”³³ But Mahdi’s argument that Ibn Khaldun rejected occasionalism is based on this premise, along with the premise that Ibn Khaldun shared the “philosophical” aspiration for explanatory certainty, and the position that the Aristotelian scientific method renders it attainable. Together, according to the argument, these entail his rejection of occasionalism.

But then, what of Ibn Khaldun’s extensive refutation of philosophy, which appears in the *Muqaddima* shortly after the discussion on *‘ilm al-kalām*? According to Mahdi, this refutation was only directed toward the Neo-Platonic tendencies of the Muslim “pretenders” to philosophy. His theoretical objection to them was against their claim that divine beings can be known through reason, whereas Ibn Khaldun “upholds the Aristotelian-Averroistic doctrine that the essences of divine beings cannot be directly and fully comprehended by reason.”³⁴ Thus, Ibn Khaldun’s refutation of philosophy is not, as it turns out, a refutation of philosophy, but rather a refutation of “false” philosophy; Ibn Khaldun being an adherent to the “genuine” philosophy of Aristotle and Averroes. In line with this genuine philosophy, then, for Mahdi’s Ibn Khaldun, “the essences of physical beings can be comprehended because these beings can be perceived by the senses.”³⁵ At this point it would be useful to note how

³³ Al-Azmeh. *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship: A Study in Orientalism*, 81.

³⁴ Mahdi. *Ibn Khaldun’s Philosophy of History*, 110.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 110

this process works, according to the theory. “Starting from the sensible data of experience, it aims at the progressive abstraction of universals until it rests with the simple apprehension of essences,” Mahdi explains, “This ascending movement of thought to the supreme genera, or the most general properties of things, is then followed by a descending movement starting from universals and ending in affirmations about the essential attributes of things subsumed under these universals.”³⁶

But taken at face value, Ibn Khaldun’s refutation of philosophy is not limited to rejecting the claim that divine beings can be known through reason. He also rejects the claim that the universal essences of sensible beings can be apprehended through abstraction, and therefore, that knowledge about the nature of sensible individuals can be arrived at through deduction from the apprehension of these universals. “The arguments concerning the corporeal existents constitute what they call the science of physics,” he writes, “The insufficiency lies in the fact that conformity between the results of thinking - which as they assume are produced by rational norms and reasoning – and the outside world, is not unequivocal.”³⁷ That is, Ibn Khaldun’s refutation of philosophy is precisely that, contrary to the material logic of Aristotle, the nature of the mind does not meet the nature of the things investigated, as Mahdi put it. Consequently, the aspiration to explanatory certainty cannot be met, in the way

³⁶ Ibid., 80.

³⁷ Ibn Khaldun. *Muqaddima*, 401. (see also: Al-Azmeh. *Ibn Khaldun in Modern Scholarship: A Study in Orientalism*, 100-101.)

they claimed, even about the physical. “At any rate, however, whatever (conformity) is attested by sensual perception, has its proof in the fact that it is observable, not in (logical) arguments,” Ibn Khaldun writes, “Where, then, is the unequivocal character they find in (their arguments)?”³⁸

In his discussion on logic, we find Ibn Khaldun saying exactly what we would expect from the preceding. “Thus as one has seen, the science (of logic) is not adequate to achieve the avowed intentions (of the philosophers),” he writes, “As far as we know, this science has only a single advantage, namely, it sharpens the mind in the orderly presentation of proofs and arguments, so that the habit of excellent and correct arguing is obtained.”³⁹ Thus, for Ibn Khaldun, logic is not capable of apodictically comprehending the essential natures of things, and then arriving at certain knowledge about individual things by deduction from that. However it is not completely useless. Its usefulness lies in its allowing us to make reasonable inferences on the basis of information provided by the senses. “They employ it a good deal in the physical and mathematical sciences, as well as in the science that comes after that,” Ibn Khaldun concludes, “Even if (those sciences) are not adequate to achieve the intentions of the (philosophers), they constitute the soundest norm of (philosophical) speculation that we know of.”⁴⁰ Even the natural sciences, then, are not capable of achieving the absolute explanatory certainty hoped for by the

³⁸ Ibid., 401.

³⁹ Ibid., 405.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 405.

philosophers. But with the application of the logical method of the philosophers, they are capable of a greater degree of explanatory probability than with any other known method. All of this is connected, of course, with Ibn Khaldun's treatment of causality, discussed above. If the way in which phenomenal causes exercise their influence is beyond our knowledge, then this entails (indeed it is another way of saying) that the essential natures of physical things are not apodictically comprehensible through inferences made on the basis of empirical observation.

In the face of this, it seems the defender of Mahdi's position would only have recourse to the hypothesis that Ibn Khaldun's refutation of philosophy, along with his *kalam* discussion on causality (which makes the same epistemological point in other terms) do not represent his real position, but are a kind of lip service or strategic maneuver explained by the supposed need to negotiate the relation between 'Philosophy and the Law.' In the absence of actual textual evidence, this would amount to almost nothing more than unsupported assertion. However, if an independent case can be made, based on the text, that the methodology Ibn Khaldun deploys in his own new science entails an embrace of the philosophical paradigm and a consequent rejection of occasionalism, then it would lend a great deal of plausibility to the position that what we find in the third-party discussion of philosophy and *'ilm al-kalām* reflect less his own view than, perhaps, the requirements of the audience. In fact, a fairly strong case can be made along these lines.

On the first page of his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun tells us that history is rooted in philosophy, and deserves to be a branch of it. So what does this mean? If Mahdi is correct, then Ibn Khaldun means to prescribe a method of evaluating particular, historical reports against universal principles understood as necessarily governing all temporal events. This not only presupposes that there are universal principles that necessarily govern the course of all temporal events (and which themselves are, consequently, timeless), but that these principles are discoverable. Otherwise, of course, the notion of applying them to evaluate historical reports would be mute.

All of this appears in the process of Ibn Khaldun's criticism of past historians' uncritical reliance on historical reports in plain transmitted form. "They did not check them with the principles underlying such historical situations, nor did they compare them with similar material," he writes, "Also, they did not probe with the yardstick of philosophy, with the help of knowledge of the nature of things, or with the help of speculation and historical insight."⁴¹ All the elements of Mahdi's reading are present here. The "principles underlying historical situations" are the timeless, universal principles necessarily governing temporal events. This is the metaphysical presupposition of the method, expressed here as to "probe with the yardstick of philosophy", which requires "the help of knowledge of the nature of things;" the epistemological

⁴¹ Ibid., 11.

presupposition being that such knowledge is possible. The argument for this interpretation follows.

First, Ibn Khaldun understands the validity of his methodology to rest on the fact that events across time are ultimately similar. This comes out in the course of his discussion of the historian al-Mas'udi's claim that the Israelite army of Moses numbered 600,000. Ibn Khaldun claims that that is impossible because, "known customs and familiar conditions" prove that an army that size could not have been sustained by the available territory, and would be too large to march and fight as a unit. "The situation of the present day attests to the correctness of this statement," he writes, "The past resembles the future more than one drop of water resembles another."⁴² This last statement is crucial. Ibn Khaldun's inference here is from the premise, that, under the familiar conditions of the present day, an army of that size would be impossible, to the conclusion, that in the past, armies of that size would also have been impossible. And clearly, this inference is invalid without the additional premise that events across time are ultimately similar. They "resemble each other more than one drop of water resembles another."

Furthermore, this similarity of events across time is not to be understood as a brute accident, but as a consequence of their all being necessarily governed by similar, underlying universal principles. This becomes clear if we compare Ibn Khaldun's rather bold assertion about the resemblance between

⁴² Ibid., 12.

the past and the future, with his warning against analogical reasoning in history. "A hidden pitfall in historiography," he writes, "is disregard for the fact that conditions within nations and races change with the change of periods and the passage of time."⁴³

Often, someone who has learned a good deal of past history remains unaware of the changes that conditions have undergone. Without a moment's hesitation, he applies his knowledge (of the present) to historical information, and measures such information by the things he has observed with his own eyes, although the difference between the two is great. Consequently, he falls into an abyss of error.⁴⁴

On the face of it, we have what appears to be a direct contradiction. Here, we are told that conditions change over time. There, we were told that conditions over time resemble each other more than drops of water. The only way to reconcile this is to distinguish conditions that are subject to change from conditions that are not subject to change, basing the fallibility of analogy on the former and the credibility of Ibn Khaldun's method on the latter. And this is what Ibn Khaldun does. "Every event, whether existence or action, must inevitably possess a nature peculiar to its essence as well as to the accidental conditions that may attach themselves to it," he writes, "If the student knows the nature of events and the circumstances and requirements in the world of existence, it will help him to distinguish truth from untruth in investigating the historical information critically."⁴⁵

⁴³ Ibid., 24.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 26.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 36.

Understood in straightforwardly Aristotelian terms, the “essence” of the event, is that without which a particular event would not be the kind of thing that it is. While the individual thing itself (the “primary substance” in Aristotelian terminology) will change if it gains or loses features accidental to its essence, or cease to exist should it lose an essential feature; the essence itself – that is, what it is to be that kind of thing – is not subject to change. For example, this tree will change, and even cease to exist when, for example, it is cut down and the wood is used to make a house; in which case it would lose the features that gave it unity in being a tree (that is, its “tree-ness”). So, the individual tree itself is subject to change, but the essence peculiar to the nature of any tree (what it is to be a tree, or what “tree-ness” consists in) is a fixed and timeless reality – a “fact of the world of existence”, as opposed to a particular event in the history of this or that individual tree. Generalizing, a nature peculiar to the essence of a thing is a set of principles that govern the temporal processes which it undergoes – that is, the ordered manner in which it changes – which follow from the kind of thing that it is, and which apply necessarily to anything of the same kind.

At any rate, when Ibn Khaldun refers to the “nature of events and the circumstances and requirements in the world of existence”, as a standard for the critical investigation of “historical information”, he is establishing a dichotomy between the two. There is information that is historical, and that which is not. This is necessary, because what we are after here is knowledge

that can be applied in critically evaluating historical information; and to use historical information to evaluate historical information would be to fall into the very fallacy of analogical reasoning that Ibn Khaldun warned against. So the world of existence is distinguished here from the world of historical narrative, and knowledge of the former – knowledge of the principles of being – is made the measure of the latter. Naturally, then, for Ibn Khaldun, distinguishing between the two is crucial.

“We must distinguish the conditions that attach themselves to the essence of civilization as required by its very nature; the things that are accidental and cannot be counted on; and the things that cannot possibly attach themselves to it,” he writes, “If we do that, we shall have a normative method for distinguishing right from wrong and truth from falsehood in historical information by means of a logical demonstration that admits of no doubts.”⁴⁶ From this follows the epistemological implication of Ibn Khaldun’s method. That is, that the timeless universal principles that necessarily govern all temporal events, and thus history itself, are discoverable, and therefore applicable as theoretical instruments for critically evaluating historical reports, in a way which avoids the pitfalls of analogical reasoning.

IV. Ibn Khaldun’s occasionalism between method and metaphysics

⁴⁶ Ibid., 38.

How, then, can we reconcile all this with Ibn Khaldun's previously examined positions on causality and philosophical method? Is it possible to do so without concluding, as Mahdi does, that Ibn Khaldun actually rejects occasionalism, and that these positions do not, therefore, reflect his true views? This depends on whether Ibn Khaldun's references, here, to "principles underlying historical events", "essences", "natures", "facts of existence", and the like, can be plausibly understood in a way which is compatible with his positions there, and with occasionalism, generally. Here, we face a challenge which does not present itself to the prospect of the occasionalist interpretation of the causal language described earlier by al-Azmeh and discovered in our examination of Ibn Khaldun's discussion of *ilm al-kalām*.

A feature of the phenomenal interpretation of causal language discussed there, is that it does not (in Mahdi's terms) "venture beyond the facts of history and experience," except in the form of "hypothetical constructions which have no objective counterparts." Thus, one of al-Azmeh's key statements in this respect (cited above), could be re-written to read: "If this (occasionalist) ontology were accepted, nothing would stand in the way of rationally elaborating the phenomenal existence of that which *has existed* (rather than "exists") by virtue of this ontology." Or more precisely, the two versions would be equivalent ("exists" = "has existed") because on a strictly phenomenal interpretation of causal language, (again, in Mahdi's terms) "the horizon of the real is reduced to the facts of history and experience." But it has been made clear that the

expressed aspirations of Ibn Khaldun's intended method presuppose and require, that the genuine facts of history and experience are to be sifted from historical narrative by means of the "yardstick of philosophy;" i.e. "facts of existence" which lie beyond the horizon of time and history. These facts come in the form of objectively existing universals (natures, essences, and the like). This problem has a metaphysical and an epistemological dimension, each of which we will treat separately.

Mahdi, above, described the "ancient" *mutakallimūn* as rejecting "the metaphysical basis of logical demonstration" by holding that "all effects are the direct creation of God rather than the results of causes inherent in the nature of things," because this doctrine "led them to the rejection of the objective existence of universals and to view universals and essences as purely mental constructions with no counterparts outside the mind." First, we should concede that Mahdi is correct in viewing the objective existence of universals as the metaphysical basis of the possibility of logical demonstration, insofar as this leads, in the sense explained above, to explanatory certainty regarding natural phenomena. Then putting aside the historical question about the views of the *mutakillimūn*, let us take the simple proposition that "all effects are the direct creation of God" as an adequate statement of occasionalism as such. This being established, the remaining question is whether this position entails the rejection of the objective existence of universals, and the conclusion that these are purely mental constructs with no counterparts outside the mind?

I think this is not the case. Rather, as we saw above, all that occasionalism entails is rejection of the independent existence of universals, along with the notion of their having any causal capacity in the ontological sense. Universals can exist objectively, as eternal objects of Divine Will and Knowledge, without thereby existing independently. That is, on the premise that God is timelessly eternal, history is not the horizon of the real - the past is not all that exists. Thus, there can be an objectively existing, divinely ordained fact that natural events *occur* in a certain divinely ordained pattern across all of time and space; a “fact of existence”, as Ibn Khaldun calls it, which is *not* just the essentially historical fact that events *have* (or have been observed to) occur in that pattern in the past. That would be a fact of universal scope, binding the future and past together under a timeless reality, and which is not just a purely hypothetical or mental construction. It meets the metaphysical conditions required for the possibility of logical demonstration as applied to nature. Yet it remains a Divine act and not an independently existing determinant of Divine will, and so does not violate the essential point of occasionalism.

Above, we noted that any occasionalist interpretation of Ibn Khaldun’s section on *‘ilm al-kalām* would have to face the question about the causal intermediaries, which he acknowledges as possible, between God and phenomenal causes: since they can be neither ontological nor phenomenal, in what sense are they “causal”? This interpretation of his reference to objectively real universals furnishes a possible answer. If universals are understood in this

way, as the *content* of an eternal divine decree, then their function is similar to that of phenomenal causes in that they constitute a relation of unity between spatio-temporally distinct events, without operating causally in an ontological sense (that is, nothing depends on them for existence). Yet, they are different from phenomenal causes in that they are not observable. Of course, this raises notoriously difficult philosophical questions about the relationship between the timelessly eternal and the temporal, but these questions apply to any form of realism about universals or necessary laws of nature, and so are not unique to occasionalism. The point here is just that realism about universals can be made compatible with occasionalism, and remain robust enough to metaphysically underwrite the possibility of explanatory certainty of the sort at which Ibn Khaldun's method appears to aim.

On the epistemological side of the problem things are quite different, at least in light both of Ibn Khaldun's refutation of philosophy, and his insistence in the section on *ʿilm al-kalām* that any non-phenomenal "causes of causes" other than God cannot be known. As we saw, an epistemological presupposition of the method he prescribes seems to be, not just that universals objectively exist, but that they are discoverable as such. The only thing that distinguishes his method from that of mere analogy, is that on his method, inferences are supposedly premised on "conditions that attach themselves to the essence of civilization by reason of its very nature;" where, in the case of analogy, inferences are fallaciously premised on conditions that are merely contingent

and change over time. Yet Ibn Khaldun's objection to philosophy, as we saw, was just that any conformity, between the natural world and our concepts thereof, is attested by observation alone and not by logic. Consequently, to the extent that such concepts "venture beyond" history and experience, it can only be as hypothetical construction, and not as the apprehension of anything objective beyond the temporal horizon. Such hypothetical constructions about natural laws binding on future events will be invariably based on observations of the past. For this reason, Al-Azmeh argues that Ibn Khaldun's methodology is essentially analogical, though Ibn Khaldun leaves the strong impression of having advertised it as something more.⁴⁷

But recall Ibn Khaldun's statement, cited above, that, "even if (those sciences) are not adequate to achieve the intentions of the (philosophers), they constitute the soundest norm of (philosophical) speculation that we know of." This appears to acknowledge that, even though we can never reach the philosophers' goal of explanatory certainty, there are yet, between exercises in analogy, greater and lesser approximations of that goal to be had. Thus, the way is open for understanding Ibn Khaldun as using the philosophical model of logical demonstration as more of an ideal by which to measure the relative quality of the analogical inferences to which we are, in fact, limited. That is, we may never be able to apodictically identify what attaches to the very essence of

⁴⁷ Al-Azmeh, Aziz. *Ibn Khaldun: An Essay in Reinterpretation* (London: Frank Cass, 1982), 121-135.

civilization by reason of its nature, because our concepts of civilization (and of nature, generally) are limited to that which can be attested to by observation, and therefore, to civilization under the limited conditions of history and experience available to us. However, we can certainly be aware of the relative degree to which certain sorts of historical conditions have been observed to change, as compared to others.

That is, experience presents us with degrees of contingency. So those conditions of civilization which have the most general applicability in history and experience, or conditions of a sort which simply have never been observed to change, certainly approximate a hypothesized essence of civilization, better than do those of a sort that have been observed to change more frequently. Reference to “essences” and “natures” might play the role, for Ibn Khaldun, of epistemological ideals, which though actually unattainable, effectively guide the natural scientist, methodologically, toward greater degrees of explanatory probability. It is important to remember that, in this context especially, philosophical justification for the objective existence of universals does not depend on our being able to actually apprehend them. Their existence follows, quite arguably, from the combination of divine providence and divine eternity. In other words, though we may be only capable of hypothetical constructions on the basis of past observation, these constructions are not altogether without any objective counterparts. There are timeless universal truths, enacted by God’s eternal will. Therefore, even if we cannot apprehend the essential natures of

things directly, we still have reason to believe that such things exist (objectively, if not independently), and can then plausibly suppose that by searching for those conditions that are attached to civilization most generally, we can form a concept that at least approximates its essential nature to a greater rather than lesser degree. And on this basis, we can draw analogical inferences with a higher probability of truth, than otherwise. This reading of Ibn Khaldun's epistemology is both consistent with his refutation of philosophy, and compatible with occasionalist interpretation of his account of *'ilm al-kalām*.

To conclude, in the course of this chapter we have seen that, in his *Muqaddima*, Ibn Khaldun expresses a methodologically occasionalist position. Secondly, we have shown how his references to natural causation and objectively real universals can be understood in a way that is compatible with a positive occasionalism. Finally, we outlined a plausible reading of the epistemological role that Ibn Khaldun intends for these universals in his methodology, which is compatible with both occasionalism and his refutation of philosophy. Along the way, we have, perhaps, laid out some starting points for discussing a comprehensive framework within which to theorize the relationship between an occasionalist ontology and a philosophy of the natural and social sciences.

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